
Summer 7-15-1990

Three Modern Views of Merlin

Gwyneth Evans

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Evans, Gwyneth (1990) "Three Modern Views of Merlin," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 16 : No. 4 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol16/iss4/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>



Mythcon 51: A VIRTUAL “HALFLING” MYTHCON

July 31 - August 1, 2021 (Saturday and Sunday)

<http://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/mythcon-51.htm>



Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico; July 29 - August 1, 2022

<http://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/mythcon-52.htm>

Abstract

Examines the use of Merlin as a character in Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, two novels by J.C. Powys, and Susan Cooper’s *The Dark is Rising* series. Notes parallels and differences in Merlin’s power, role, prophetic ability, link with the divine, and vulnerability.

Additional Keywords

Cooper, Susan. *The Dark is Rising* (series)—Characters—Merlin; Merlin; Powys, J.C. *A Glastonbury Romance*—Characters—Merlin; Powys, J.C. *Porius*—Characters—Merlin; Tennyson, Alfred Lord. *Idylls of the King*—Characters—Merlin

Three Modern Views of Merlin

Gwyneth Evans

Among the gifts of the Celtic tradition to world literature, the figure of Merlin is one of the best. Prophet, mage, counsellor, architect of Stonehenge and Camelot — Merlin has since his earliest appearances played many roles, all endowing him with power and imbuing him with mystery. As mage or enchanter he adds a whiff of the Old Religion to even the most Christian accounts of the Arthurian court. His relation to that court changes from story to story: in some he is an important protector and advisor of Arthur, while in others his connection is sporadic and not always, as we say now, "supportive." This article will examine the use of Merlin within the literature of the last 150 years by comparing the work of three very different authors — Tennyson in his *Idylls of the King*, the novelist J.C. Powys in *A Glastonbury Romance* and *Porius*, and the children's novelist Susan Cooper in her five books collectively entitled *The Dark is Rising*. As this is a rather ambitious undertaking, covering in the case of the novels alone approximately 3000 pages of text, the study is necessarily selective, but does reveal some interesting parallels and differences in the treatment of the nature of Merlin and his power, his prophetic ability and his link with the divine, his role as advisor rather than protagonist, and his ultimate vulnerability. Despite their pre-Christian origins, the Arthurian stories developed within the Christian tradition of medieval Europe, and it is interesting to observe how later writers link the pagan prophet/mage to their own Christian or post-Christian world views. Merlin's supernatural powers, especially those of prophecy, make him particularly important in revealing each author's vision of the nature of good and evil, and the moral and spiritual dimensions of human action.

Tennyson

While all would agree with Elizabeth Jenkins that the closing lines of *Idylls of the King* are "the last great lines written about Arthur in our literature" (214), certainly the imaginative vigor and sheer beauty of Tennyson's poem have had a great influence on ideas of the Arthurian legends in his time and in ours, and hold much to interest a modern lover of fantasy. Tennyson is perhaps the easiest to read of all the major English poets, and his poetry comprehends both the rich delights of the sensory world and the mystic intimations of another, visionary reality. *Idylls of the King* tells its stories with a wealth of physical and psychological detail which makes the Arthurian world and its personalities vividly present. Written over a period of thirty years, the twelve narrative poems of the *Idylls* create a unified vision of an ideal community, doomed by human weakness and the malice of a few, but an image of meaning and hope for subsequent ages.

In his vision of Arthur's kingdom Tennyson places

more emphasis on the psychological than on the magical: this is true even in his depiction of Merlin, who enters the poem near the beginning as the one who receives the infant Arthur, conceals and watches over him during his childhood, then stage-manages his claiming of the throne of Britain. Merlin is the central character in only one of the *Idylls* — a compelling description of his seduction by Vivien. But he appears throughout the *Idylls* as a "mage" with two of his traditional attributes, as prophet and as builder of wonderful edifices. Although in tradition Merlin is also a chief counsellor of Arthur, Tennyson's idealized, almost supernatural Arthur doesn't seem to need such counsel, and instead Tennyson makes it clear that Merlin's activities are directed by the King. Merlin is introduced in the first poem, "The coming of Arthur," as

mage Merlin, whose vast wit
And hundred winters are but as the hands
Of loyal vassals toiling for their liege.

Merlin it is who built Arthur's great hall in Camelot, implicitly by magical means. The building was done, however, at and under Arthur's direction, and the pagan magic of its architecture put to a Christian purpose

... Merlin's hand, the Mage at Arthur's court,
Knowing all arts had touch'd, and everywhere,
At Arthur's ordinance, tipt with lessening peak
And pinnacle, had made it spire to heaven. (C&L)

Merlin is one with Arthur in his proposed creation of an ideal community, based on Christian principles of justice, courage, humility and purity, and never falters in his loyalty and respect for the King. He takes the form of a mysterious old man at the city gate who teasingly greets the young Gareth, and tells him that Camelot is

city built
To music, therefore never built at all,
And therefore built for ever.

The means by which Arthur's will to create an ideal city was accomplished, Merlin is also its interpreter, To Gareth and later, in a darker context, to Vivien. Although the first young person, Gareth, is ready and willing to accept the ideals of Camelot, the second, Vivien has her own contemptuous view of them, and it is untouched by either Merlin's art or the principles which motivated it.

"Merlin and Vivien" was one of the first *idylls* to be completed, published in 1859 with three others in a volume intended to be titled *The False and the True*; this title, and the subsequent placing of the story of Merlin's seduction at the center of the completed *Idylls*, at the point where the hopeful early years of Arthur's reign yield to the doom-laden later ones, emphasizes the theme of man's reason and his higher faculties yielding to his folly and sensual

appetites. As the oldest and wisest follower of Arthur, Merlin would seem to be least vulnerable to temptation. He has both insight and foresight, seeing through Gareth's disguise and Vivien's attempted seduction of Arthur himself, and aware of the doom that threatens the kingdom, but he is unable to avert his own part in that doom. When he begins to succumb to the charms of Vivien.

Then fell on Merlin a great melancholy,
He walk'd with dreams and darkness, and he found
A doom that ever poised itself to fall,
An ever-moaning battle in the mist,
World-war of dying flesh against the life,
Death in all life and lying in all love.
The meanest having power upon the highest,
And the high purposes broken by the worm.

Fleeing from his mood, he takes a little boat to Brittany, but "mark'd not" that Vivien — the worm herself — steps into the boat with him. "She took the helm and he the sail; the boat / Drave with a sudden wind across the deeps." (This passage reminds me of that powerful scene in LeGuin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* where Ged is fleeing in a little boat from his shadow, and suddenly coming to the end of a narrow fjord turns and finds the shadow in the boat with him.) Rapt in his melancholy trance the mage is unaware of the human reality beside him, which in fact the very cause of his mystical foreboding.

Merlin's error is to underestimate Vivien — to see her as she presents herself, a pretty, kittenish girl smitten with an infatuation for the wise old man. He should know better, for both he and we see Vivien in action, spreading malicious rumors through the court and undermining the faith Arthur's followers in the virtue and honesty of those around them.

But Vivien half-forgotten of the Queen
Among her damsels broidering sat, heard, watch'd,
And whisper'd. Thro' the peaceful court she crept
And whisper'd, then, as Arthur in the highest
Leaven'd the world, so Vivien in the lowest,
Arriving at a time of golden rest,
And sowing one ill hint from ear to ear,
While all the heathen lay at Arthur's feet,
And no quest came, but all was joust and play,
Leven'd his hall. They heard and let her be

Thereafter, as an enemy that has left
Death in the living waters and withdrawn,
The wily Vivien stole from Arthur's court.

As she schemes and practices against their peace, describing herself privately as a little rat boring a hole in a dyke by night "to let the boundless deep / Down upon far-off cities while they dance," the men of Arthur's court say with Lancelot "Let her be"; one wonders if the women mightn't have been more suspicious of Vivien. She most vividly embodies a recurrent theme of the *Idylls*, the conflict between appearance and reality, most of Arthur's knights are not practiced in mistrust, but Merlin who speaks on other occasions of the ambiguity of truth and the power of illusion really should have known better. But

although he is very old and very wise, Tennyson's Merlin is still a man, and an old man may be more vulnerable to a seductress than a younger man who *knows* himself still capable of inspiring love. Vivien

... would often when they met
Sigh fully, or all-silent gaze upon him
With such fixt devotion that the old man,
Tho' doubtful, felt the flattery, and at times
Would flatter his own wish in age for love.
And half believe her true, for thus at times
He waver'd, but that other clung to him,
Fixt in her will, and so the seasons went.

Vivien's motive is of course not love but revenge: she has set out from Mark's court in a conspiracy with that baleful Cornish king to destroy the vaunted purity of Arthur and his knights. The orphan of parents killed in wars against Arthur, Vivien was raised in Mark's court and corrupted early by him, modern psychoanalytic seduction theory could clearly account for Vivien's malevolence and promiscuity. "Born from Death was I," she says to Mark.

Among the dead and sown upon the wind —
And then on thee! and shown the truth betimes,
That old true filth, and bottom of the well,
Where Truth is hidden. Gracious lessons thine.
And maxims of the mud! This Arthur pure!
Great Nature thro' the flesh her hell made
Gives him the lie! There is no being pure...

Unlike the enchantress who in some versions of the Arthurian stories deduces and/or entraps Merlin, Tennyson's Vivien has no occult powers or learning; her strength comes from her sexuality, her amorality and her hatred. "as love, if love be perfect, casts out fear," she says. "so hate, if self-hatred at heart, impels her to 'ferret out' the secret vice or shame which she senses or imagines in every one around her; she even attempts to seduce King Arthur himself. Embarrassed by the failure of that effort, she focuses her revenge on Merlin.

Merlin's great reputation attracts Vivien as making him worth of her efforts; she hopes to seduce him, but to gain an even greater power over him, such as would prevent him from being of any further use to Arthur and his kingdom. Merlin had unwisely revealed to Vivien his knowledge of a charm

The which if any wrought on any one
With woven paces and with waving arms,
The man so wrought on ever seem'd to lie,
Closed in the four walls of a hollow tower,
From which was no escape for evermore,
... and he lay as dead
And lost to life and use and name and fame.
And Vivien ever sought to work the charm
Upon the great enchanter of the time.

Having attracted Merlin's attention in Camelot

... with slight and sprightly talk,
And vivid smile, and faintly-venom'd points
Of slander

So that he

Would watch her at her petulance and play,
Even when they seem'd unlovable, and laugh
As those that watch a kitten. Thus he grew
Tolerant of what he half disdain'd.

Vivien flatters him with her pretence of love, and pursues him to the Breton forest of Broceliande. Although enveloped in melancholy and foreboding, he fails to connect his anxiety about Camelot with the pleasantly distracting girl who

Writhed toward him, slid up his knee and sat.
Behind his ankle twined her hallow feet
Together, curved an arm about his neck,
Clung like a snake; and letting her left hand
Droop from his mighty shoulder, as a leaf,
Made with her right a comb of pearl to part
The lists of such a beard as youth gone out
Had left in ashes...

'And lo, I clothe myself with wisdom,' drew
The vast and shaggy mantle of his beard
Across her neck and bosom to her knee,
And call'd herself a gilded summer fly
Caught in a great old tyrant spider's web,
Who meant to eat her up in that wild wood
Without one word.

Vivien also attempts on him the tactic which she used with deadly effect on the previous idyll, "Balin and Balan," making scabrous charges against various knights of the Round Table, until finally she ventures to strike at Arthur himself. This rouses Merlin from his placid amusement at her sallies, and briefly he sees her for what she is — not a pretty, saucy girl, but a deceitful and wearisome harlot. Mastering her rage, she weeps and upbraids him for his cruelty to her, swears her honest love, and then in the violent thunder storm which seems to avenge this false oath scurries to Merlin for protection. The whole lengthy passage between Merlin and Vivien in Broceliande is a fascinating study of manipulation and betrayal, comparable perhaps to the scene the Shakespeare's *Richard III*, where Richard woos Lady Anne over the corpse of her husband whom he had murdered. Merlin is not really deceived by Vivien, but he fails to take her seriously, nor does he recognize his own vulnerability; As she says to him,

The people call you prophet, let it be,
But not of those than can expound themselves.

With pleas, endearments, pretended jealousy and insecurity, anger and fear both real and assumed, Vivien wears down Merlin's resistance, then resorts to her most effective tactic — physical arousal, against which reason is unavailing. Having denounced her to himself, Merlin considers he has settled the question and is off his guard, and of course also feels a little guilty towards her. While one might suppose that a man of well over one hundred would be immune to sexual enticement, Merlin isn't.

The pale blood of the wizard at her touch
Took gayer colours, like an opal warm'd

...she call'd him Lord and liege,
Her seer, her bard, her silver star of eve,
Her God, her Merlin, the one passionate love
Of her whole life, and ever overheard
Bellow'd the tempest, and the rotten branch
Snapt in the rushing of the river-rain
Above them; and in change of glare and gloom
Her eyes and neck glittering went and came;
Till now the storm, its burst of passion spent,
Moaning and calling out of other lands,
Had left the ravaged woodland yet once more
To peace; and what should not have been had been,
For Merlin, overtalk'd and overworn,
Had yielded, told her all the charm, and slept.

Then, in one moment, she put forth the charm
Of woven paces and of waving hands,
And in the hallow oak he lay as dead,
And lost to life and use and name and fame.

Then crying, 'I have made his glory mine,'
And shrieking out, 'Old fool!' the harlot leapt
Adown the forest, and the thicket closed
Behind her, and the forest echo'd 'fool.'

While the forest may echo Vivien's evaluation of her wizard lover, I believe it cries out at her also, for in destroying Merlin and thus hastening the destruction of Arthur's kingdom she works against those things which the poem shows as making human life worthwhile — love, honesty, gentleness, order, beauty, art and truth. Truly Vivien is "born from death" and lives her life in the service of death, is she not then a greater fool than her unfortunate lover?

J.C. POWYS

The next manifestation of Merlin to be discussed here is in two novels by one of the great oddities of modern British Literature — John Cowper Powys. In his 90-some years (he died in 1962) he published over 50 books, many of them novels and fantasies, and many of them concerned to some degree with the Arthurian legend and its Celtic sources. His major novels show some affinities with Hardy, in his loving depiction of the landscape and folk life of rural Britain, and others with D.H. Lawrence in his intense and uninhibited studies of the human psyche and its passions. Like James Joyce in *Ulysses*, too, he uses a mythic story as the substructure for a novel about modern characters — *A Glastonbury Romance*. The use of the mythic parallel in this novel, where modern characters living in the English town in Glastonbury find themselves experiencing situations from the Arthurian and Grail stories, or from the Celtic legends which lie behind them, is particularly apt because landscape and local tradition are very much part of the legendary background. At moments in this novel, past and present fuse in the "Cimmerian twilight" of Glastonbury, creating an extraordinary sense of the continuing vitality of myth. Merlin in this novel is both past and present, coming from the past of mythic history to affect and be affected by a man who now plays something of his role.

In the Somerset town of Glastonbury, traditional center

of the Grail legends and resting place of King Arthur, Powys found a thoroughly developed tradition giving a symbolic and spiritual significance to certain features of the local landscape — the Tor, Chalice Well and Pompadour Bridge — which he uses to connect his modern characters to their mythic forerunners of the Arthurian stories. The Merlin of modern Glastonbury (or, I should say, Glastonbury of the 1930s, when the novel was published) is Johnny Gead, a maverick preacher and faith-healer who conceives a plan to stage a great pageant about the legendary history of the town. The parallel with Merlin is far from complete — suggested, in fact, rather than fully worked out. There is no single character in the role of King Arthur, and Merlin/Gead acts much more independently, as in some of the earliest Arthurian stories, rather than as a functionary of Arthur's court. It is as Mage and Magician that Powys shows Gead perform an act of healing by taking the suffering of the victim upon himself. As a Christian Gead considers himself a "miracle-worker" rather than a "magic-monger" like the pagan Merlin, but Powys himself does not make such a distinction, implying that the spiritual greatness of the two men, and their extraordinary ability to draw upon the forces of the nature and the supernatural, transcend any differences of age and dogma.

Gead does, however, reverence his mythic prototype, and evidently feels a deep sense of identification with him even though he's a pagan. He refuses to allow Merlin to be represented in the Pageant, although all the other Arthurian characters, and even Christ himself, are so represented. Gead won't explain, but another character speculates that

While for the world at large Christ was by far the more sacred, here, in Glastonbury, where he disappeared from view, Merlin must always be the 'numen' or the 'Tremendum Mysterium' that can be second to none. (594)

Gead's only comment on the subject, the cryptic remark that "Christ was buried in Jerusalem, is clarified by another, powerful, scene in the novel, when Gead spends the night in an old mansion associated with the location of Merlin's final disappearance. (Powys, interestingly, locates Merlin's disappearance, enchanted imprisonment or "esplumeoir" in Glastonbury rather than Broceliande. In this chapter Gead brings his powers of healing to help none other than Merlin himself. Challenged to sleep in a supposedly-haunted chamber, Gead hears a heart-wrenching cry of "Nineue! Nineue!")

...he suddenly found himself sitting straight up in the creaking little bed in a grievous fit of pure fear. He knew it was. Nothing could stop it from being lifted up again. (460)

But instead it is Gead himself who cries out the second time, also calling upon Nineue.

He did feel a certain relief when he had uttered this rending and tearing scream. He found he had sufficient self-control now to ask himself what it had been in the intonation of that voice that had made his heart so sick. The horror he had felt was not precisely fear. What it

really was pity. It was pity carried to such a point buy the intonation of that reiterated "Nineue! Nineue!" that it became worse than fear. (461)

He then pleads with the spirit of Merlin to show himself — "this desperate lover of Nineue... this great and lost magician," and manages to force from himself, "words mingled and bloody spume," a blessing — "Christ have mercy on you!" This spiritual struggle and victory is followed by the appearance of his chamber of his own Nineue, the attractive young girl of the household who has heard his cries. Gead, unlike Merlin, resists her enchantments, and leaves the house at peace. Whether or not his suffering and intercession for the old magician has brought peace and release to *him* is left, like much in this complex and mysterious novel, unresolved. At the end of the novel Gead undergoes death by water, again undertaking to suffer in place of another person, and is rewarded by a vision of the Grail which he carries with him into death much as, in his earlier account, Merlin had carried the pagan Grail with him into Chalice Hill.

The second of Powys' Arthurian novels, *Porius*, published in 1951, treats Merlin directly, as a character in the main action of the novel, which is set in Britain of the Arthurian period, about the 5th century A.D., a rough and primitive era unlike the world of the medieval romances. Again he is a character who acts quite independently of Arthur the King, and plays a much more important role in the novel than Arthur does. Indeed, Merlin (or Myrddin Wyllt, his Welsh name) is the central character, in terms of the novel's metaphysics if not in human terms. For Powys identifies him with the classical god Cronos, or Saturn, who was imprisoned under the earth by his son Zeus (Jupiter) or, alternatively, held in an enchanted sleep in the far Western Isles, as Merlin is held in his enchantment by Vivien/Nineue. Powys links these two powerful, imprisoned figures and creates of his Merlin a god-like character who takes the part of the pluralistic natural world against the authoritarian, repressive, monotheistic creeds struggling to establish themselves in Dark Age Britain, in an interesting blend of Celtic and Greek myth. Merlin is depicted — sympathetically — as a god of the underworld who longs to establish a new Golden Age, when man and nature would live in harmony, and strife and exploitation cease. He is an anarchist, who defies all systems and authorities, and even attempts to destroy his own image.

The golden Age can never come again till governments and rulers and kings and emperors and priests and druids and gods and devils learn to un-make themselves as I did, and leave men and women to themselves. (276)

When he is eventually rescued from his imprisonment, this time under a huge rock on Mount Snowdon rather than in an oak tree, by the novel's eponymous hero, the eagles of Jupiter scream away. The are the "Birds of Absolute Power," who represent the "world of blind authority... ruled by one Caesar, or one God..." against which Powys exalted the "chance-ridden chaos of souls, none of them without some fellow-feeling, some fellowfeel-

ing, some kindness..." (681) of the pluralistic universe associated with the reign of Cronos/Merlin. Prince Porius eventually learns to worship Merlin, not as Arthur's counsellor but as a great god, who wants to bring back an age of peace for "the innumerable weak and terrified and unbeautiful and unconsidered and unprotected creatures" of the earth (681).

The Second usual aspect of Merlin in *Porius* is his empathy for the natural world and its creatures, an attribute he shares with T.H. White's Merlin of *The Once and Future King*. When Porius first encounters Merlin, by the river at twilight, he hears animals gathering, and senses "some strange and unusual excitement transmitted equally to the human, animal and vegetable worlds." Physically, Merlin is a strange, huge being, with green-black eyes and a great beard usually concealed inside his cloak, but he is also a shape-shifter, and can appear convincingly as a savage herdsman, a magician or as a prince. Holding Merlin, Porius has a vision of

the recession backwards of the bones under his grasp into those animals-worlds and vegetation-worlds from which they had, it seemed, only yesterday, emerged. And by degrees the figure he was holding grew less self-contained.... It was as if what he held, and what he could do easily have crushed, became a multiple identity composed of many separate lives, the lives of beasts and birds and reptiles, and plants and trees and even rocks and stones! This multiple entity was weak and helpless in his grasp; and yet it was so much vaster, so much older, so much more enduring than himself that it awed him even while he dominated it. (58-9)

This Protean Merlin, this "huge, composite earth-creature" (59), brings about a miraculous transformation in one beautiful scene of the novel. In a Welsh legend found in the *Mabinogion*, the faithless wife Blodeuwedd was punished by being transformed into an owl. At a gathering in *Porius* where the fanatical Christian priest is demanding that every creature and every thought be, in his words, "bound and chained to Christ," Merlin draws to himself a great owl which has been passing in disturbed flight over the scene. The priest denounces the creature as "Where from the beginning of the world," but Merlin takes it under his cloak, then releases it in the form of a beautiful girl or bird-maiden, who will henceforth be the dream-lover of lonely sleepers. (647-56) The moonlight drama is a vindication of celebration of the feminine and the erotic, in defiance of the life-denying Puritans. Powys is virtually unique among modern writers in his ability to extend a myth with such imaginative force that the new material seems a natural development of the original.

Susan Cooper

The last Merlin to be considered appears in Susan Cooper's series *The Dark is Rising*, five novels in which modern children are caught up in a timeless warfare of the Dark against the Light. Although the struggle of the historical King Arthur against barbarism is just one episode in this warfare, and not directly depicted in the novels, the Arthurian Merlin is a central character in all of them, as he

is given an identity which transcends time. Of the Old Ones, the deathless guardians and defenders of the light, Merlin is the oldest, the strongest and the wisest (*Grey King*, 37). Moving freely between different time periods and able to take his companions with him, he links events of the Arthurian age with those of subsequent centuries, and particularly of our own — a time when the Dark is rising in force to dominate the world with its evil.

The first book of the series, *Over Sea and Under Stone*, describes a quest in which the three Drew children, on a family outing in Cornwall, become caught up — at first innocently, but soon with a growing sense of its danger and desperate urgency. What is sought by the Drew party and their opponents, various sinister representatives of the Dark, turns out to be nothing less than the Grail itself. Only gradually does one child, who has steeped himself in the Arthurian legends, come to realize not only the power and importance of the Grail, but the identity of Merriman Lyon, the eccentric professor who aids them in the quest and rescues them at crucial moments when the Dark seems about to triumph.

'Merriman Lyon,' he said softly to himself. 'Merry Lyon... Merlion... Merlin...'

He looked across the room to where Great-Uncle Merry's white beard towered over the rest, slightly bent as he listened to what someone else was saying. The angular brown face seemed more than ever like an old, old carving, deep eyes shadowed and mysterious above the fierce nose.... And Great-Uncle Merry, as if he knew, turned his head and looked him full in the face for an instant, across the crown; smiled very faintly, and looked away again. (249)

From the outset of the series, Merriman Lyon is seen as an impressive and somewhat mysterious figure: although they call him Great-Uncle, he is no relation but

had been close to the family for so many years that it never occurred to them to wonder where he had come from in the first place.

Nobody knew very much about Great-Uncle Merry and nobody ever quite dared to ask.... How old he was, nobody knew. 'Old as the hills,' Father said, and they felt, deep down, that this was probably right. There was something about [him] that was like the hills, or the sea, or the sky, something ancient, but without age or end.

Always, wherever he was, unusual things seemed to happen. (9)

He is very tall and bony, with a great head of white hair, a hooked nose, lined face, and intense, deep-set eyes. He "always gave the impression of being far too big for any room he was in." (22) Physically commanding, Merriman also has an air of authority and compels respect from many different sorts of people; he is a "renowned scholar, who draws on his vast knowledge of ancient lore to protect" the children on their quests, and in a later book we learn that he is a professor at Oxford.

This is the manifestation in which Merlin appears in *Over Sea, Under Stone* and *Greenwitch*; he appears in *The Dark is Rising* to a different child, Will Stanton, in a dif-

ferent guise — that of a butler. However, as Will is also one of the Old Ones he soon learns to know Lyon the butler in his true nature as a great lord of the forces of the Light, with powers over time, nature and men's minds. In all of the books except *The Grey King*, in which Merriman/Merlin appears only briefly, in a supernatural dimension, he has an identity in the present world, but this identity is most evident in the first three books; by the last two, when the children are quite aware of his extraordinary nature and powers, he is less evident as a character in the ordinary world.

What is the role which Merriman/Merlin plays in the lives of the children who are Cooper's central characters? He makes it clear himself, on several occasions, the *he* cannot accomplish the quests and tasks which have been assigned to them; he is there to help them recognize what they need to know, and to rescue them from assaults of the Dark which only his opposing psychic force would withstand, but he never seems to be directing or controlling the action. He accompanies and aids the children much as Gandalf accompanies and aids the hobbits, and is also inclined to disappear on mysterious errands the way Gandalf does, leaving his proteges to figure things out for themselves. For the child protagonists he is the ideal sort of adult: his authority is not that of a parent or a teacher, but they are able to admire and follow his direction wholeheartedly. When is the first volume the children realize they need help but don't want to tell their parents what they're involved in, they turn to him with relief. "That's it of course... We can tell someone and still have things all right. We can tell Great-Uncle Merry!" (75) Although sometimes rather too obviously a *deus ex machine*, popping up conveniently just when needed, Merriman is generally a wise mentor, remaining in the background and leaving the central action to the children.

King Arthur appears as a character in the last two of the five novels, and when he does so Merriman/Merlin takes on more of his traditional Arthurian role. We learn that he had carried the son of Arthur and Guinevere forward in time, to live in our own day, and there is always a great warmth shown between Arthur and the man he calls "My lion" (e.g. *Silver on the Tree*, 240). But because Arthur remains a shadowy, mythical character, who has no other manifestations in our present world, his presence does not dominate the books the way Merriman/Merlin does. What distinguishes Cooper's use of the Merlin figure is her sense of his timelessness, and his ability to take on a role in the present which has a meaning for her modern child characters somewhat equivalent to that which he had for the King in the Arthurian legends.

While the contending forces in Cooper's cosmology — the Dark and the Light — are clearly equated with Evil and Good, hers is a post-Christian, though not an anti-Christian, world in which the Old Ones of the Light, even the boy Will, have greater power against the Dark than a priest does (as in *The Dark is Rising*) and in which the Christian tradition seems to be valued as a cultural rather than a

spiritual force. Pre-Christian rituals such as the making of the Greenwitch and the Hunting of the Wren (*The Dark is Rising*) have a significance in the action and symbolism of the books which no Christian ceremonies do, although some are described. In the almost Mithraic religion of Cooper's novels, Arthur and Merlin are both great lords who lead the forces of the Light against the Darkness, and whole Merlin on occasion acknowledges the lordship of Arthur, he himself seems to play a more important role in the continuing struggle.

Tennyson, Powys and Cooper, writing at different times for different audiences, have adapted to their own different purposes the figure of Merlin which they inherited from legend and the medieval romances. All treat the story of Merlin very seriously, showing the successes and the failures of the ideals which he promulgates as having profound consequences to the condition of human life. Tennyson's Merlin is seen largely in moral and social terms he works for the salvation of Arthur's society, in which Tennyson reflects a vision of his own England, and Merlin's failure reveals the weakness which keeps it from fulfilling its ideals. Powys' Merlin is essentially concerned with the salvation of the individual, who must learn through a passionate engagement with the forces of natural life to resist the social and psychological pressures which would confine him. Cooper's vision is a more overtly cosmological one: her cycle of novels recounts episodes in the struggle of the forces of Light against the rising of the Dark, but the cosmological struggle is always translated too into the moral terms of human behavior, and it is simple human goodness which ultimately enables the Light to triumph. While in none of these works is Merlin the central character, in all of them he plays an important role in making the re-enactment of the Arthurian story meaningful to the lives of modern readers.

Bibliography

- Cooper, Susan. *The Dark is Rising*. Atheneum, 1973.
 ———. *Greenwitch*. Atheneum, 1974.
 ———. *The Grey King*. Atheneum, 1975.
 ———. *Over Sea, Under Stone*. N.Y. Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965
 ———. *Silver on the Tree*. Atheneum, 1977.
 Powys, John Cowper. *A Glastonbury Romance*. N.Y. Simon and Schuster, 1932.
 ———. *Porius*. London: MacDonald. 1951.
 Tennyson, Alfred. *The Complete Poetical Works of Tennyson*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985.
 Jenkins, Elizabeth. *The Mystery of King Arthur*. N.Y.: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1975.

◆ Check Your Label ◆
 Please look at the mailing label on the envelope your copy of *Mylchlore* was mailed in. The number following your name indicates the issue your subscription is due to expire. If that number is 62 or 63, please renew now to avoid any interruption to your continuing issues.